

The Ukrainian Government's Memory Institute Against the West

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FEATURED | The Ukrainian Government's Memory Institute Against the West

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"How a Kyiv state organ is undermining Ukraine's European integration"



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By Dr. Andreas Umland

Historical remembrance and national reconciliation are touchy issues— especially when they concern large wars, mass murder, and suffering of millions in the recent rather than far-away past. Ukraine's memory of the nation's Soviet history is primarily concerned with the enormous number of victims of Bolshevik and Nazi rule over, and wars in, Ukraine. Millions of Ukrainians – along with millions of other victims – living in the “bloodlines” (Timothy Snyder) were killed and terrorized by Europe's two most murderous totalitarian regimes. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians collaborated to one degree or another with both of the killing machines – a considerable challenge for Ukrainian memory policies.

Ukraine's Post-Soviet History and Ukrainian Historical Memory

This daunting intellectual, cognitive and emotional test is aggravated by the fact that Kyiv is currently fighting a war of survival with the main negative protagonist of its national memory— Moscow. More often than not over-ambitious, cynical and ruthless, the Kremlin's foreign policies and related public discourse have recently again become driven by undisguised aggressive imperialism and a love-hate approach to Ukraine bordering on the psychopathological. This is further complicated by the fact that Ukraine has a sizeable Russian ethnic minority – approx. 17% of its population, partly allegiant to Moscow rather than Kyiv. Purposeful manipulation with topics of national memory, recent history, and interethnic relations, not the least in Polish mass media and social networks, is part and parcel of Russia's so-called hybrid war against Kyiv. The Kremlin's attack on the

Ukrainian nation is executed, with a multitude of military and non-military, hard- and soft-power instruments, on a daily basis. It actively exploits controversial historical issues and aims to destroy the Ukrainian state from within rather than from outside.

This already peculiar constellation is even more exceptional in view of Ukrainian memory policies' far-reaching repercussions for its international relations. This concerns especially the interpretation, evaluation, and memorialization of the (in)famous Bandera faction of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN-B) of the inter-war and World War II periods. Currently favored by the ruling class and large parts of the intellectual elite of Ukraine, the officially affirmative classification of the OUN is deeply controversial among Ukraine's Russophone citizens, foreign partners, and pro-Western intelligentsia. The OUN was normatively (though not geographically) anti-Western and manifestly anti-Soviet, at the same time. The OUN is now seen by many Ukrainians as having been anti-totalitarian and liberationist. Yet, the ultra-nationalist, ethnically cleansed and monistic one-party state that the Bandera faction envisaged, at least until the early 1940s, would have itself amounted to an illiberal and totalitarian dictatorship.

Especially, the leaders and ideologues of the OUN were ethnocentric and xenophobic. At the same time, many of them gave their and their families' lives to Ukraine's fight for independence. Some Ukrainian nationalists – including at least one brother of Stepan Bandera – were slain by the Nazis, but most perished while fighting Stalin's regime. Both, the OUN's original founder and most cultic leader fell victim to spectacular assassinations by Soviet special agents, in the West: Yevhen Konovalets was killed by an NKVD agent in Rotterdam in 1938, and Stepan Bandera was murdered by a KGB agent in Munich in 1959.

While issues of national memory can be thorny in other countries too, they have a domestic divisiveness and international explosiveness for the Ukrainian state which is – in this toxic combination – rare. It was, therefore, surprising that Kyiv post-Euromaidan leadership decided to hand over the government's main official organ responsible for memory affairs to a group of relatively young activists with unknown scholarly credentials. The Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance (Ukr. abbrev.: UINP) attached to Ukraine's Cabinet of Minister was, in 2014, put under the control of a circle of nationalistic publicists with little previous attachment to Ukrainian academic institutions and limited international exposure.

The UINP's current staff is closely linked to a marginal, yet industrious Galician NGO called Center for Research into the Liberation Movement (Ukr. abbrev.: TsDVR). The main aim of the TsDVR's significant book publishing and mass media activity is to further an apologetic public opinion of the OUN-B and hagiographic official discourse around its war-time leaders Stepan Bandera, Roman Shukhevych, Yaroslav Stetsko, and others. The UINP has coupled its current decommunization campaign with a comprehensive nationalization and partial "Banderization" drive in public remembrance and official discourse. It is actively supported by the TsDVR that presents the wartime Ukrainian ultra-nationalist movement as the pinnacle of Ukrainian patriotism and love of freedom. While the UINP directly influences Ukraine's executive, the TsDVR exerts an impact on Ukraine's legislative process, as a member of the famous alliance of Ukraine's civil society organizations "Reanimation Package of Reforms" devoted to drafting and pushing through reform laws in the Verkhovna Rada.

In increasingly odd facet of the activities of the UINP and TsDVR in the fields of Ukrainian publishing, journalism, education, lobbying, toponymy etc. is that they happen against the background of an upsurge of critical research on the OUN-B, at academic institutions in Ukraine, the EU, and North America, during the last decade. For instance, Germany saw, during the last years, the appearance of, among other scholarly publications, three massive monographs highlighting in detail specific aspects of the OUN-B's history. Frank Golczewski, professor emeritus at the University of Hamburg, published in 2010 a 1000-page study of German-Ukrainian relations between 1914 and 1939, *Deutsche und Ukrainer* (Schoeningh Press), dealing with, among others, the foundation of the OUN and its interaction with the pre-war Third Reich. Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe, a research fellow at the Free University of Berlin, published in 2014 a 650-page biography of Stepan Bandera, *The Life, and Afterlife of a Ukrainian Nationalist* (ibidem Press), outlining, among others, why Bandera's movement should be seen as a Ukrainian permutation of East European fascism. Kai Struve, an associate professor at the University of Halle-Wittenberg, published in 2015 a 700-page monograph on the anti-Jewish pogroms in Western Ukraine in summer 1941, *Deutsche Herrschaft, ukrainischer Nationalismus, antijüdische Gewalt* (De Gruyter Oldenbourg), demonstrating the OUN-B's deep involvement in antisemitic violence, already during the first weeks of the Nazi-Soviet war.

The contents and results of Ukraine's apologetic and hagiographic memory policies by the governmental UINP and non-governmental TsDVR are primarily a problem in and of itself. They prevent Ukrainians' coming to terms with their recent past. Because of the deep resentment, they encounter in Russophone Ukraine, they hinder the development of a unified Ukrainian political nation. The UINP/TsDVR's activities have been criticized from the perspectives of historical scholarship, interethnic relations, national remembrance, social cohesion, ethical standards, and moral responsibility. In addition to these perspectives, they can be also examined from the viewpoint of Kyiv's foreign policy priorities and especially against the background of Ukraine's aspiration for deep European integration.

The UINP's history policies and TsDVR publishing industry touch four central themes in the post-war West's public life that are relevant to Ukraine's current foreign relations:

- (1) the anti-nationalist impetus of European integration,
- (2) the centrality of the Holocaust to contemporary Western thought,
- (3) modern criteria of delineating scholarly from non-scholarly discourse, as well as
- (4) the relevance of Poland to East European affairs and of Germany to all-European politics.

The effectual impact that the UINP, TsDVR and their supporters had on Ukraine's public opinion and international image, during the last two years, creates problems for the Ukrainian state's foreign relations, in the following ways:

Ukrainian Nationalism and European Anti-Nationalism

First, the UINP's and TsDVR campaign to put Bandera's radically nationalist OUN at the center of Ukraine's national memory contradicts the original impetus of European integration. Whereas NATO's creation was driven by anti-Soviet motifs, the European Communities and later the European Union were and are anti-nationalist projects, as the frantic antipathy of Europe radical nationalists towards Brussels illustrates. The starting point of post-war European reconciliation and unification was France's and Germany's attempt to overcome their centuries-long confrontation. Europe's integration began as a response to the escalation of increasingly radical nationalist sentiment in pre- as well as inter-war Europe and as a reaction to two world wars is driven by radically ethnocentric European movements – above all, but not only by German fascism.

Against this background, the increasing prominence of affirmative references to the OUN – as a form of inter-war and wartime ultra-nationalism – in post-Euromaidan Ukraine's public life represents an amounting challenge to the EU's core principles. No surprise that Brussels expressed its consternation in a [February 2010 resolution](#) in which the European Parliament "[d]eeply deplore[d] the decision by the outgoing President of Ukraine, Viktor Yushchenko, posthumously to award Stepan Bandera, a leader of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) which collaborated with Nazi Germany, the title of 'National Hero of Ukraine' [and] hope[d] ... that the new Ukrainian leadership will reconsider such decisions and ... maintain its commitment to European values." Yet, as recently became clear, this resolution had no (or even the opposite of the intended) effect on Ukraine's political and intellectual elite. While the Russian aggression against Ukraine has led many EU representatives to become more cautious in its critique of Kyiv, the current grace period will sooner or later be over.

Ukrainian Nationalism, the Holocaust, and the Post-War West

Second, a particularly problematic aspect of the OUN's history is its antisemitic prejudices and activities, as well as Ukrainians' remembrance of these ideas and actions – or absence thereof. To be sure, Judeophobia was, unlike in German Nazism, not the primary aspect of the OUN's xenophobia. Yet, Ukrainian Jews were by many (though not all) Ukrainian war-time ultra-nationalists regarded as enemies of, or at least undesirable in, Ukraine – if of only secondary or tertiary importance. The OUN's antisemitism motivated at least some OUN members to participate in the Holocaust – either as German collaborators or as independent Jew-hunters in territories occupied by the Third Reich. Several thousand Jews were killed by Ukrainians between 1941 and 1944 – many of them apparently by members of the OUN or by radicalized soldiers of its military wing, the Ukrainian Insurgency Army (Ukr. abbrev.: UPA).

In Ukraine, only a few political and intellectual leaders seem to comprehend how important the memory of the Holocaust has become to the formation of post-war Western intellectual and political discourse. The failure of Ukrainian memory policies to address this issue adequately will have corrosive repercussions for Ukraine's foreign relations. The more particulars of certain OUN members' involvement in the Holocaust – for instance, those crimes committed already, in summer 1941 – will become known to the Western public, the more scandalous the Ukrainian state's current glorification of the OUN and its leaders will become. So far, Western knowledge of these details is limited as much of the debate on this issue is conducted in the Ukrainian language understood by only a few Western scholars and journalists.

The public debate of these and similarly difficult issues is, moreover, frequently spoiled by the Kremlin media's bombastic defamation campaigns and purposefully biased narratives of the OUN's activities. The international discussion of these issues also suffers from numerous Western dilettante commentaries which are, in turn, often based on Soviet secondary sources or/and post-Soviet Russian historical manipulations. The frequent factual imprecisions and indiscriminate historical accusations voiced by various ill-informed journalists and activists – especially towards Bandera who spent much of World War II under German arrest – play a subversive role within the Ukrainian public discourse of the events in question. The large amounts of

erroneous assessments, sweeping generalizations and unproven allegations proposed by various non-specialist or/and politically engaged discussants, within and outside Ukraine, are being, with great relish, picked up and scrupulously dissected by UINP and TsDVR representatives and other OUN apologists, at academic conferences, international debates, and television talk-shows. They have created a widespread opinion, among Ukraine's intellectuals and politicians, that the Western public is fundamentally ill-informed about recent Ukrainian history, if not thoroughly brain-washed by Soviet and post-Soviet Russian propaganda.

Yet, scholarly research conducted at reputed European and North American universities has been describing, during the last decade, in more and more detail where OUN-related Ukrainians participated in the Holocaust – and where not. These peer-reviewed studies produced at some prime academic institutions of such countries as the United States, Canada, Germany, Poland or Sweden are unaffected by the Kremlin's various influence campaigns. What is increasingly clear from this recent scholarly publications are that OUN's anti-Semitic ideas and activities were not only a result of German inspiration, initiation, and instigation. They were also driven by home-grown Ukrainian prejudices against Jews, in particular by the crypto-racist conspiracy theory of "Judeo-Bolshevism" – the obsession with the Jewish family background of some communist leaders.

Some documents outlining the OUN's plans for a cleansing of Ukraine from, among other nationalities, Jews were adopted in spring 1941, i.e. before Germany's attack on the Soviet Union. Already in the 1930s, the OUN's xenophobia had become informed by, among others, the anti-Jewish writings of Dmytro Dontsov – the intellectual founding father of modern Ukrainian ultra-nationalism and translator of, among other fascists, Benito Mussolini as well as Adolf Hitler into the Ukrainian language. Although Dontsov never became an OUN member, his proto-fascist pamphlets were constitutive to the ideological formation of Ukrainian nationalism in the 1930s, and continue to influence parts of Ukraine's intelligentsia until today.

In the coming years, the relatively recent research results published in English and German will spread among the larger epistemic communities of Western researchers of international fascism and genocides, in general, as well as of the Holocaust and World War II, in particular. The new findings now being increasingly published in Western languages will gradually enter comparative nationalism studies, European history textbooks, university teaching syllabi, international Holocaust education, as well as mass media accounts. They are becoming a source of frequent embarrassments between apologetic Ukrainian intellectuals, on the one side, and Western experts on Ukraine, on the other.

Sooner or later the wider Western public will become aware of the details of inter-war Ukrainian antisemitism, the OUN's partial participation in the Holocaust, and Kyiv's demonstratively apologetic as well as sometimes whitewashing memory policies concerning the OUN and its leaders. As a result, Ukraine's image in the West will be lastingly damaged. As the 2010 European Parliament resolution indicated, it could put under question such crucial projects as Ukraine's gradual integration into the EU and NATO.

Ukrainian Nationalist Publicism and Academic Research on the OUN

A third problematic aspect of the current Ukrainian memory policies is its non- or even anti-academic impetus. To be sure, Ukraine does have a number of internationally respected historians who have published in respected outlets critical accounts on the OUN, or/and have taught or presented on the OUN at highly ranked foreign universities as well as think-tanks. They include, among others, Yaroslav Hrytsak and Oleksandr Zaitsev at the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv, Andriy Portnov (from Dnipro) at the Humboldt University of Berlin, or Heorhiy Kasianov at the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine in Kyiv, to name but a few. There are also some scholars belonging to the Ukrainian diaspora of, for instance, Canada who have published highly critical research on the OUN and post-Soviet Ukraine's memory policies, including John-Paul Himka at the University of Alberta, Myroslav Shkandrij at the University of Manitoba, Marco Carynnyk at the University of Toronto, and Ivan Katchanovski at the University of Ottawa. Most importantly, there have appeared, during the last decade, more and more Ukrainian younger researchers who are presenting original critical research on the OUN and related themes in refereed high-impact publication series and are winning fellowships from prestigious Western research institutions or foundations. They include, among others, Olena Petrenko (from Ternopil) at the Ruhr University in Bochum, Yuri Radchenko at the Center for the Study of East European Inter-Ethnic Relations in Kharkiv, Yuliya Yurchuk (from Rivne) at Södertörn University in Stockholm, Anton Shekhovtsov (from Sevastopol) at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna, Olesya Khromeychuk (from Lviv) at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, or Ivan Gomza at the famous Kyiv-Mohyla Academy.

While none of these scholars are being repressed by Kyiv and can freely circulate their findings, these academics exert the only limited influence on official governmental policies and are under-represented in mass media reporting as well as intellectual debates on the OUN. Instead, the civil servants at the UINP, activists of the TsDVR as well as similarly inclined local incumbents dominate public historical discussions on the OUN in Ukraine. That is in spite of the fact that only a few of them have properly academic credentials. Apparently, most of them have not had the chance or interest to publish in relevant scholarly journals and

to present research papers to expert audiences at international academic conferences. None of them seem to have any notable international scientific achievements or a record of sustained comparative cross-cultural research. As a result, they are largely unknown outside Ukraine.

The UINP's and TsDVR's Director Volodymyr Viatrovych, to be sure, is a celebrity of sorts, as he himself has become the subject of investigations and debate on the pages or websites of, among other outlets, The Nation, Foreign Policy, and Foreign Affairs. In 2010-2011, Viatrovych won a visiting fellowship at the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute. He was apparently invited on Harvard's "celebrities track" rather than within a traditional scholarly funding scheme. Viatrovych did not have then and apparently still does not have any relevant peer-reviewed academic publications, i.e. texts accepted by respected refereed research journals or book series. Instead, in 2008-2010, Viatrovych had been the Head of the Archive of the Ukrainian Security Service – a high position within Ukraine's official cultural affairs that apparently qualified him for an invitation to Harvard.

In 2011, he published an unapologetic book on the massacre of Polish civilians by the OUN-UPA in Western Ukraine in 1943-1944, with the publishing division of the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy – a prestigious Ukrainian university. However, Viatrovych was himself affiliated, during that period, to this university whose then president and later minister of education Serhiy Kvit had earlier written a hagiography on the above-mentioned proto-fascist writer and OUN-inspirer Dontsov. Viatrovych's book became the target of scathing critique and sarcastic ridicule by a number of academic experts who felt forced to review a scholarly unremarkable manuscript that had been written at Harvard University, was printed by the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, and has since become a thorn in Ukraine's relations with Poland.

The strange under-representation of properly academic Ukrainian historians in the formation of Ukrainian memory policies may look like a minor issue, yet can have far-reaching repercussions. As Jean Pisani-Ferry recently noted in a different context: "Science involves more – and more stringent – scrutiny than, say, business or government. It is actually the standard-bearer of good practices concerning the validation of analyses and the discussion of policy proposals. Errors regularly occur in academia, but they are more swiftly and systematically corrected than in other fields. The collective nature of scientific validation also provides guarantees against capture by special interests."

The spirit of rationalism, criticism, universalism, agnosticism and pluralism reigning in the universities of Europe, North America etc. makes them the, perhaps, most archetypical "Western" institutions. Unlike in post-Soviet societies, established academics at reputed universities and research institutes have thus a special status in Western societies. They – rather than influential clerics, prolific pundits, state officials, prominent journalists, military men, popular writers etc. – function often as inspirers of, and sometimes as arbiters in, public disputes.

The extra-academic personnel, communication and publishing policy of the UINP is set to clash not only with the work of Ukrainian and non-Ukrainian academics but also with the positions of official representatives of Western states. European and American politicians will not accept arguments – however, well formulated – by publicists who may exhibit abundant patriotic feelings, but do not possess relevant academic credentials. The West will not take seriously discussants who cannot point to note publications in well-known scholarly journals, well-received presentations at international academic conferences and resulting impact on the research disciplines as well as respect within the epistemic communities that this or that self-ascribed expert claims to represent.

Ukraine's National Security and Destructive Memory Policies

The fourth and most immediate as well as a consequential political problem with Kyiv's emerging official canon on World War II is, however, its fundamental unacceptability to such states as Poland, Germany or Israel – i.e. countries with especially high stakes in the interpretation of Europe's history in 1939-1945. For Poland, the particular understanding of the OUN/UPA's massacre of tens of thousands of Polish civilians in Western Ukraine in 1943-1944 is non-negotiable. For Germany, any suggestion that Nazi collaborators are to be seen as war heroes and that, for instance, OUN/UPA leader Roman Shukhevych – once an officer for, first, the *Wehrmacht* and, later, the notorious *Schutzmannschaften* – may be honored as a martyr is out of the question. For Israel and international Jewish organizations, the idea that an as explicitly anti-Semitic organization as the OUN, a number of whose members participated in the Holocaust, could provide guidance to the formation of the post-Soviet Ukrainian nation is an incomprehensible affront.

While some Ukrainians may (by mistake) regard Israel's opinion as inconsequential, the relevance of the positions that Poland and Germany take towards Ukraine is more obvious. Poland has so far been Ukraine's closest international partner, and prime advocate within the EU as well as NATO. Germany's recent relatively pro-Ukrainian position within the EU has been crucial to the introduction and prolongation of sanctions linked to Russia's covert intervention in the Donets Basin. Ukraine's dubious memory policies are putting the pro-Ukrainian political and social forces in these and many other countries under increasing

strain. For instance, Germany has a variety of left- and right-wing pro-Russian political groups, as well as business-related circles that skillfully exploit Ukraine's intensifying Bandera cult. They actively use partially correct factual material – along with falsified information – on the history of the OUN and its heroization today to argue for an appeasement of the Kremlin's desire for Western disengagement from, and Russian hegemony over, Ukraine.

In Poland, the most *ukrainosceptic* group consists of descendants of the war-time victims of Ukrainian ultra-nationalist violence and ethnic cleansing who exert influence on the Polish public as a whole. In July 2016, Ukraine's misconceived post-Euromaidan policies had a concrete fall-out when the Polish parliament recognized the 1943-1944 UPA massacre of Poles in Volhynia and Galicia as genocide. It is true that recent Polish domestic developments too have contributed to the increasing tensions in Kyiv's relations with Warsaw. Yet, the Ukrainian factor was a necessary additional condition for the deterioration of the Polish-Ukrainian relations in the way and with the speed they did in 2014-2017.

The Vienna-based Ukrainian political scientist Anton Shekhovtsov summarized the prehistory of Poland's fateful 2016 declaration of the Polish parliament the following way: This "move followed a visit to [a group of Poland's ruling Law and Justice party] PiS MPs [who came] to Ukraine in the hope to convince Ukrainian MPs to stop glorifying the [war-time] murderers of the Poles. [Their initiative happened against the background that] PiS is divided on the issue: the moderates seemed to try to hold the radicals in check and prevent the Volhynia genocide act from being adopted. These [Polish MPs] were the moderates who visited Ukraine, but they could not find common ground with the Ukrainians. The renaming of a street in Kyiv after the name of the polonophobic Ukrainian fascist Stepan Bandera was [in July 2016] the last straw, and the PiS moderates could no longer contain the radicals, hence the [1943-1944] Volhynia genocide act. The radicals from both sides won, the bilateral Poland-Ukraine relations suffered a huge blow, the Kremlin benefited."

Of course, the UINP and TsDVR are not the only Ukrainian institution responsible for these and other worrisome repercussions of Kyiv's memory policies. Yet, they have, with their apologetic activism, significantly contributed to the deterioration of Ukraine's foreign relations since 2014. The pronouncement of the director and other speakers for the UINP carry because they are official representatives of a governmental institution, special weight. The UINP's and TsDVR's staff in particular, but also hundreds of other similarly oriented Ukrainian politicians, journalists, amateur historians and dilettante activists have contributed to the current Polish-Ukrainian tensions by the commission as much as by omission.

For the last twenty-five years, Ukraine's nation-builders have concentrated, in their search for role models, on the – indeed, especially – tragic and heroic aspects of Ukraine's fate in World War II. They have been facing only with great reluctance problematic sides of their nation's contemporary history. Many have not yet understood that some (and what exact) practical conclusions have to follow from their verbal acknowledgment of the existence of a "dark side" in Ukraine's recent past. The participation of Ukrainian nationalists in the Holocaust or 1943-1944 massacre of Poles is today rarely denied as such. Yet, much of the Ukrainian public remembrance of World War II since 1991 has been conducted, as if either these and other crimes by the OUN never happened, or as if they were unrelated to the OUN's ideology, justified by the world war context, or/and merely a result of German instigation (which they, of course, frequently were).

Instead, apologetic Ukrainian polemicists regularly react to criticism by domestic and foreign observers with, what was known during Soviet times, as "*whataboutism*": What about Polish whitewashing of the past? What about Israel's selective memory? What about crimes by other national liberation movements?... Even if often valid by themselves, such references are mere distractions from Ukrainian themes, and the increasingly salient foreign political problems, especially in Polish-Ukrainian relations, that Ukraine's official memory policies create.

Neither *whataboutism* nor negationism, isolationism or escapism will help Ukrainians to alleviate the accumulating embarrassments that Kyiv's glorification of war-time ultra-nationalists creates among its friends in the EU, North America, and other world regions. The various lapses of Ukraine's misconceived memory policies, especially during the last two-and-half years, are now hitting back, as they provide plenty of convenient manipulation material for the Kremlin's propagandists, proxies, and sympathizers. They undermine the trust of Ukraine's major foreign partners in Kyiv's project for a modern European-Ukrainian state, at a time when Ukrainians need their help most.

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